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AVON • CONNECTICUT

A Brief Informal History

Alice H. Thompson

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*A Brief
Informal
History*



By ALICE H. THOMPSON

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AVON WOMAN'S CLUB
AVON, CONNECTICUT
1954

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AVON, CONNECTICUT

In even a brief account of a small town's story one must choose a point along history's ever-rolling stream to begin the narrative.

I am asking you to start from Newtown, Massachusetts (now Cambridge), on that June morning in 1636 when Thomas Hooker with his Puritan congregation, plus 160 head of cattle, were at last ready to begin their journey to the valley of the "Great River." This is a part of Avon's story as some of these people and their sons and daughters were soon to take up claims within the limits of our town. This adventure was the more remarkable as many of this company, to quote, "were persons of figure in England who had lived in honor, affluence, and luxury."

They had neither river course nor trail to guide them, only the compass kept them on their western way through trackless forests and swamps, up hill and down dale, until at the end of two weeks weary travel they reached an open meadow on the banks of the Connecticut where in the words of Thomas Hooker "the minds of his people were strongly inclined to plant themselves." Their settlement is now the capital of our state.

These hardships they endured willingly in order to establish a community where according to their leader, "the foundation of authority would be laid firstly in the consent of the governed."

Shelters were quickly built and exploring parties went out in search of land suitable for agriculture on which their existence depended. One such party looked down from the mountain on the peaceful valley of the Tunxis. The Great Meadows, grass-grown but treeless, offered ready grazing and hay land. There were forests for timber and game, and a river teeming with salmon and shad in their season.

In 1640 several families came through the Notch and become the first settlers of the Tunxis Plantation. As Avon was a part of Farmington for 200 years their history is also ours.

There were wild beasts in the forest, deer, wolves, catamounts, and bear, and the region was not uninhabited for the smoke of Indian campfires rose through the trees. The Tunxis Sepus tribe, (Tunxis meaning

crooked and Sepus meaning "little River" in contrast to the "Great River" and translated "the tribe at the bend of the little river") were the more willing to be friendly with their white neighbors because of their powerful enemies, the Pequots on the east and Mohawks on the west and north. They looked to the white men for protection. Their relations continued to be friendly.

There were atrocities, - a "most horrid murder" in 1657 of a woman and her maid and the burning of their house, and the killing of a Mr. Scott at Scott's Swamp, but these were adjudged to be the work of strange Indians not of the Tunxis tribe. Nearly ten years later the house of John Hart burned to the ground and the entire family with the exception of one son who was caring for the farm stock in Nod, perished in the flames. This was not the work of Indians. It was a common custom to build wooden chimneys and line them with clay. There were no bricks available nor was there lime for mortar to build stone chimneys. Small wonder there were often fires. "Chimney viewers" were regularly appointed officers of the town.

In a deed dated 1673 the tribe gave to the settlers a rectangular piece of land measuring five miles northward from Round Hill, now being rapidly levelled as fill at the new bridge, three miles eastward, eight miles westward and ten miles south, the town "freely giving the Indians 200 acres of land" which they occupied until the spring of 1775 when a considerable part of the tribe left to join their red brothers at Stockbridge and Oneida.

It is easy to understand why in the early years the settlers built their homes near together, and as word of King Philip's War reached their ears, seven houses in town were fortified and guard seats were set apart at the entrance to the meeting house where some ten or twenty men would be on the lookout against a sudden attack.

In order to find suitable land for agriculture, the men went far afield returning to their homes at night. The Proprietors of Common Fields, the "Great Meadows", maintained three principal openings, the North Meadow Gate near the new bridge, the South Meadow Gate on Meadow Road, and the "Eight Acre bars". This section was used for common pasturage except during the growing season when cattle were moved to mountain pastures. The Meadows were closed for grazing in

the spring and opened after harvest in the fall as crops were planted in some sections.

In 1703 the town voted to provide and keep in repair a canoe with ropes for the convenience of those passing and repassing over the river near the North Meadow Gate. In 1722 Samuel Thompson was paid five shillings for recovering the canoe which had been carried down to Simsbury by flood waters.

The main street of Farmington has changed its location very little since it was the Town Path of village days. The road to Hartford follows practically the original trail of the pioneers.

The Body of the Proprietors, 84 in number, was formed in 1672 and the first division of lands marked out. They early disposed of the whole territory either by grants or allotments, by reservations for future grants, allotments and "pitches" and reservations for highways and other common and public use.

As the danger from wild beasts and marauding Indians grew less the farmers, eager to save themselves the time-consuming travel to and from their fields began to build homes on their farm lands. In many cases the farmers owned land in more than one section. For instance, when the early settlers took up claims on West Avon Road they also took strips of land in Old Farms where forests did not have to be cleared before the land could be used for pasture and hay. As the grass here ripened late the farmers made more or less of a holiday in planning to harvest the Old Farms crop at the same time and spent a jolly hour eating their lunch together under the "nooning tree".

Each family probably has its stories and it would be an interesting project to gather them together. The one I know best is that of the Thompson family whose cabin was built near the present home of George Osborn. Soon after their arrival they looked out from their cabin door to see two Indians killing a bear on the knoll east of the house.

The town records of Avon begin with the incorporation of the town in 1830. Claims to the land previous to that time are a part of the land records of Farmington. Mr. Hodge has some very interesting maps, one of which shows the approximate line of the fence and ditch which

was the northern boundary of the "Great Meadows". It extended from the river near the gravel pits and crossed Old Farms near the Avon Old Farms athletic field. Mr. Hodge told me there are still traces of the ditch across Old Farms. The ditch was dug in certain sections as it was considered better protection from marauding wolves than a fence. Another map Mr. Hodge has is of the 200 acres assigned to the Indians in 1673 with the reservations divided into plots and assigned to the Indians by name.

Mrs. Hurlburt's "Town Clerks and Their Times" is not only a remarkable source of information but very interesting reading.

The Nod Path on the east side of the river beginning near the North Meadow Gate led to the Nod divisions. This path followed the east river bank. It was often impassable because of high water. There are houses now standing on the College Highway that originally faced toward this road. The roads were generally built by Turnpike Companies who bore the expense of building highways and bridges and keeping them in repair, thus relieving the towns and in return received dividends on their investment by way of tolls.

The main street of Farmington was part of the high road from Boston through Hartford and Danbury to New York. The Talcott Mountain and Greenwoods Turnpike joined the Farmington River Turnpike in New Hartford which followed the east bank of the river to the Massachusetts line and was one route to Albany. There was also the Farmington-Litchfield Turnpike.

In 1805 an act was passed allowing needed alterations in the location of the toll gates on this turnpike as, evidence of Yankee ingenuity, a "shun pike" had been started to avoid the gate and incidentally, the toll.

At a town meeting in April 1799 it was voted to suspend any further proceedings on building a bridge at the North Meadow Gates. If a Turnpike Company was established there the building of the bridge should be "placed on them."

This road, Farmington Avenue, the Talcott Mountain Turnpike and the Nod Path were of intimate concern to the people of Northington Parish. There was much fertile land in the northern section of Farmington, through which the river passes twice, flowing south on its west-

ern border and north on the eastern, and as agriculture was the chief interest of all, "magistrates and ministers taking their places in the field whenever their other duties would permit", claims were soon established in this area. The inhabitants however kept in touch with the village life.

They heard the call for volunteers to protect the settlements against the Indians incited by the French and the British and in return some of the men were given "soldier lots".

The First Church of Christ in Farmington was organized in 1652 and for nearly a hundred years that was the church which the people of Northington Parish attended and supported, and support and attend they must. The records show that "Sinner North" was fined for non-attendance.

Travelling was difficult by foot or horseback over rough trails. There were few four-wheeled vehicles. In fact in 1752 when the Rev. Timothy Pitkin brought his bride home in a four wheeled carriage, the astonished citizens seeing a chaise for the first time exclaimed "The cart is coming."

In 1746 the number of families in Northington was sufficient for them to apply for "winter privileges", that is to hold the services in their community during four winter months. In 1750 "being now a parish of 31 families numbering 160 souls", they "deemed the time ripe for being a society among themselves." The Farmington Church agreed to their request and with the consent of the "Honorable General Assembly of the State" they voted to build a church and became the First Church of Christ in Northington". This church was built on the Nod Path on the eastern bank of the river near the Cider Brook Cemetery. So plain was its architecture that an early wit called it "The Lord's Barn".

The Rev. Ebenezer Booge became their first pastor and served until his death in 1767. His headstone in the old Cider Brook Cemetery tells us "he was a prudent, pious, and faithful pastor". The people of the Nod Division west crossed to the Church by a ford until a bridge was built across the river. This bridge was discontinued by vote of the town in 1828.

The Rev. Rufus Hawley was ordained the second pastor in 1769.

He built the house now restored and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Robert August. The ford and bridge were east of his house.

So the Parish of Northington was established but all affairs of state centered in Farmington and these were stirring times indeed. Up to the War of Independence, Farmington increased steadily in wealth and population. It was divided into several parishes but Southington the first to become a separate town was not incorporated until 1779. The Stamp Act and other hateful tax measures were of real concern to the people of Farmington for many of the citizens had become actively engaged in trade and commerce. Mass meetings were held. "Taxation without representation" was a phrase freshly coined and "Give me liberty or give me death" was being heard for the first time.

The story of the Boston Tea Party reached the town by speedy messengers. The Boston Port Bill was to become effective on June 1, 1774.

Just before this date a hand bill was found posted at various conspicuous places in town which read "To pass through the Fire at 6 o'clock this evening, in honor of the Immortal Goddess of Liberty, the late infamous act of Parliament for farther distressing the American Colonies. The place of execution will be the Public Parade where all Sons of Liberty are desired to attend." And attend they did, "a numerous and respectable body of near one thousand people". A huge Liberty Pole was erected and consecrated, then the Boston Port Bill was read aloud, sentenced to the flames, and executed by the hand of the common hangman." There were some loyalists in the colony one of whom fervently hoped "the sins of these haughty people shall not be laid to our charge."

Town meetings were frequent and large gatherings met in the new Meeting House, the present one, which was opened for services in November 1772. At a meeting on June 15, 1774 it was voted that "as the inhabitants of Boston would soon be reduced to the utmost distress we deem it our indispensable duty to afford them speedy relief". Samuel Adams wrote the town a letter on July 29, 1774 to thank the town for 300 and 400 bushels of rye and Indian corn already received and for the promise of more when the harvest was in.

Tea drinking was given up by all patriotic Americans after the Boston Tea Party and it was a shocking thing when it was discovered

that Captain Solomon Cowles and his wife Martha had served tea to a traveller at their inn. Mr. Timothy Root was appointed "to exhibit a complaint against them" and ask them to make public confession. The guilty parties printed their confession and humble apologies in the Hartford Courant.

The first Farmington company was complete and began its march "to Boston May 18th, 1775. They were in Roxbury within sound of the guns at the time of the Battle of Bunker Hill. After the evacuation of Boston, Colonel Fisher Gay and his regiment were ordered to take possession of the town. Later they were ordered to New York. Three companies from Farmington were in action against Burgoyne and "it is confidently asserted by one whose recollections cannot be mistaken that every young man of the town, worth any consideration was at some time in the field."

Washington is said to have passed through the town six times. The notes in his journals usually say briefly "dined in Farmington." Rochambeau and his French troops passed through the town in June of 1781 on their way from Providence to Yorktown. As the rain was heavy making roads impassable the divisions were obliged to halt in the southern part of the town for several days. It is said their presence added much to the gaiety of Farmington's social life during their stay. The boulder on the green opposite the Elm Tree Inn commemorates this event.

Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown on October 19, 1781 and although the treaty of peace was not signed until two years later, the War of Independence was won and the town which had guarded the frontier for a hundred years, could settle down to peaceful activities.

Farmington began to command the trade of the new towns that were springing up in every part of the forest. Turnpike companies were building highways and bridges. At one time not less than three West India vessels were owned by Farmington merchants.

This was the time that Lt. Governor Treadwell was led to speak his oft-quoted words of warning "against the trend from work and frugality toward extravagance and ease". "Labor", said he, "is growing in disrepute. The people are laying aside their plain apparel manufactured in their own houses and clothing themselves with European and India

fabrics. The present time marks a revolution of taste and manners. The time when the independent farmer could whistle serenely at the tail of his plough is fast drawing to a close."

From 1791 to 1823 Farmington had its day, exceeding Hartford in wealth and population. But the Turnpike Companies later proved the undoing of the Farmington merchants for they not only brought trade to them but took it on to Hartford.

In the meantime a new mode of transportation had been perfected. The Erie Canal had been completed in 1822. This suggested to some public spirited citizens of New Haven that a waterway connecting them with the interior of the state would be to their advantage. A meeting was held in Farmington January 29, 1822 and in May of that year the Farmington Canal Co. was chartered. On July 3, 1825 a barge on wheels, drawn by four horses, was driven through the valley towns in the midst of great excitement. It was on its way to Granby Village where a great celebration was to be held on July 4th. The celebration began with a parade led by the barge and followed by a procession of prominent citizens in carriages and on horseback two miles long. Patriotic speeches honoring Independence Day were in order and then came the great moment. The Governor of the state with spade in hand announced "To me has been assigned the high honor of first applying the hand of labor to a work which is itself magnificent", and his spade turned the first shovelful of earth which was to start the waters of Congamond Lake toward New Haven.

There came another great day, and I quote from Deacon Hooker's diary of Friday, June 20th, 1828, "Very fine weather. A multitude of people collected to witness the launching and sailing of the first canal boat that has been seen in Farmington. Bell ringing, cannon firing, and music by the Phoenix Band. About 200 gentlemen and ladies who were previously invited sailed to and over the Aqueduct and back again. The boat was drawn by four large gray horses and rode by as many black boys dressed in white." The canal was built in sections at the expense of much hard labor as well as money. Excursions on the Canal were very popular and on October 23rd a party from Simsbury expressed their thanks to the citizens of Northington for their cheerful greeting and cordial reception of their party. Plainville worshippers came to the old

meeting house in Farmington by boat and when the feeder canal was opened Unionville people could also go to church by boat.

Of special interest to us is another entry in Deacon Hooker's diary, "Friday, November 28th, 1828. A damp and uncomfortable day. Rode to Northington to attend an adjourned town meeting. A number of people went down thither in a canal boat as far as Rev. Rufus Hawley's and then walked about a mile to the West Avon "meeting house".

An entry in 1841 advertises the canal as a business communication between New York City and the upper part of Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut. It also records the death by drowning of Foone, one of the Amistad captives who were cared for in Farmington until they could be returned to Africa.

In 1843 - Canal damaged by floods.

In 1845 - Canal damaged by unprecedented drought.

In 1846 - Canal company dissolved. Charter obtained for a railroad.

In 1848 - Railroad opened as far as Plainville.

There must have been some celebration when the scream of the whistle and the clanging of the engine bell first woke the echoes of Avon in 1850 but there seems to be no record of it.

The first church in Northington burned to the ground in 1817. Great difficulty was experienced in deciding on a location for the new meeting house. There was now a village of Avon. As Lovely Street and Whortleberry Hill had been added to the parish, some thought the West Avon site nearer the center of the parish, others as honestly thought the village the proper place. The controversy ended in a compromise - two churches were built. The Rev. Rufus Hawley, ordained pastor of the Northington church December 20, 1769, continued as pastor of the West Avon church until his death in 1826.

In 1801 a number of the inhabitants of Northington presented to the General Assembly a petition to be incorporated a distinct and separate town. This was read in a town meeting in Farmington on May 13, 1811. After "some little discussion" it was voted to take no action on the matter.

At a meeting May 6, 1830 the petition was again presented and

opposed. However an agent was appointed to negotiate the matter and at the next recorded meeting a committee was appointed to join with a committee from the Town of Avon for the purpose of running new town lines.

The Town of Avon was incorporated in 1830. This was when hopes for the future of the Canal were at their highest. A capacious warehouse was built on its banks. When the Canal was abandoned it became a general store and was so used until destroyed by fire in 1932.

Albany Turnpike was an important thoroughfare and the junction of turnpike and canal gave Avon considerable importance. At that time it had three hotels, harness, carriage and blacksmith shops and several stores. The Climax Fuse Co. was formed in 1884 and later taken over by the Ensign-Bickford Co. This has continued to be the leading manufacturing concern of the town. Saw and grist mills were built on "mill Grants" in the early days of the town.

Daniel Wadsworth built the first tower on Talcott Mountain in 1810. The tower was a favorite picnic resort in the horse and buggy days.

Avon had a library while it was still Northington Parish. Samuel Bishop was chosen librarian December 30, 1798 and kept the office until 1842. He had 111 books in his keeping. Most of these books are still in existence.

Through the efforts of public spirited citizens and the generosity of Mrs. Maude Ely Gibbons our present library was built and dedicated August 30, 1932.

Avon men were not all stay-at-homes. During the winter season when farm work was not pressing, several of them went forth as Yankee peddlers. One at least joined the "49ers" going to California by boat and returning overland, not much richer in purse but with a wealth of anecdotes to regale his neighbors.

The Tillotsons of Cherry Park Farm owned plantations in Louisiana where they kept nearly a hundred slaves. They were threatened with excommunication from the West Avon church on account of it. This brought the question of slavery into our midst.

When Lincoln called for volunteers in April 1861, ninety-six young men from Avon responded. This was seventeen more than Avon's quota. Twelve fell on southern battlefields and others returned broken in health. Avon's population in 1860 was 1059.

In all the New England colonies schools were second only to the church in consideration. The General Court of the Connecticut Colony at an assembly in 1650 ordered that schools should be kept in all the towns. The first school house in Farmington of which there is any record was ordered in 1688 when the town voted that "they would have a house to keep school in built this year of eighteen foot square, besides the chimney space, with a suitable height for that service, which house is to be built by the town's charge."

In 1756 the town voted to build two school houses 16 feet square, one at the north end and one at the south end. As this was about the time the Northington church was built we may conclude that the one at the north end was the Cider Brook school.

The equipment? - Around the wall a wide board was nailed at a convenient angle. This was the desk. In front, for seats, were benches of uniform height, on which sat the short and the tall, the young and the old. The curriculum? - The boys who attended only in the winter were to learn "to write plainly and read the Bible distinctly". The girls were "to learn to read and sew sufficiently for the making of their ordinary linen."

Each family was to provide a load of wood for the winter. In 1693 Farmington desired a man "that is in a capacity to teach both Latin and Greek, and in time of exigency to be helpful to Mr. Hooker in the ministry."

The education of the children was always a matter of serious concern to the colony and the town. At a School Society meeting December 7, 1795 a committee of three was appointed to "digest rules and regulations for the benefit of the schools and report." This they did. These rules and regulations designed "to best improve the children in letters, morals, and in manners" are very interesting but are too lengthy to quote here. However it is of interest that at this meeting the question of maintaining a central school for further instruction of the youth of both sexes

was discussed. The following is the closing paragraph: It shall be the duty of the teacher "in the whole course of instruction to impress their minds with a just sense of their duty to God, to their parents and instructors, to one another and to society, and, in general, to prepare them to act well in the various relations of social life."

Lt. Governor Treadwell was very active in securing for the Connecticut School Fund the income from the sale of lands in the Western Reserve. There was quite a famous academy in Farmington before the days of public high schools; also academies in Avon and West Avon.

There were four school districts in Avon at the time the town was incorporated. Later the number was increased to seven. The last district school was closed in 1949.

It is a far cry from the 16 ft. square school houses of the 17th and 18th centuries to our modern buildings and equipment.

Until recent years agriculture was the leading pursuit of the inhabitants of this peaceful valley of home-loving good neighbors. While the fertile soil, suitable for agriculture, has ceased to be the greatest attraction to home-seekers today, it is easy to believe that the peaceful valley has led many to build their homes here. To a marked degree they have caught the old spirit of good neighborliness and taken the welfare of the town to their hearts.

It would be impossible to name them all and their valued contributions to the life and growth of the town. However, you would not have me refrain from speaking here of the great blessing that came to us when Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Wright Alsop decided to make Avon their home. No native son living on ancestral acres could have shown more affectionate regard for the town than have Mr. and Mrs. Alsop for this, the town of their adoption.

Mr. Alsop gave most generously of this time and ability in promoting its welfare. Again we express our gratitude for his leadership. He still lives in the memory of his fellow townsmen who loved and honored him.

The West Avon Church celebrated its bi-centennial in 1951 and the Avon Church its centennial in 1919. Historical addresses at these ser-

vices chronicle the growth of these churches. St. Ann's Church was dedicated in 1919 and has been active for good in the life of the town.

The peaceful valley appealed to Mrs. John Wallace Riddle as the setting for the boys school of which she had dreamed. Her dream materialized as a group of old English buildings set down in our midst in a spot that seems especially designed for them. After World War II they served our country by providing a rehabilitation center for blinded soldiers. The school was reopened in 1948 with Mr. Donald Pierpont as provost. The full enrollment at the school this year gives evidence of the appreciation felt for his leadership and the good work done by the teaching staff. I'm sure one of the treasured memories of an Avon Old Farms boy will be of the brown stone buildings set on a hill with the valley and river below them and the mountain beyond.

No longer can it be said that agriculture is the chief pursuit of the inhabitants of Avon. The trails have become paved roads. No longer does a passing vehicle bring the whole family to the window to see who is going by and wonder where the Joneses are going this time of day.

Tallow candles have given way in turn to whale oil lamps, kerosene lamps, and electricity. The hearthfire and brick oven are replaced by an electric range.

The old copper warming pans have become fireplace ornaments although they once gave much comfort as the children went to bed in cold, cold rooms. Church congregations no longer sit through hour long sermons on a cold winter Sunday with a little foot stove filled with charcoal their only source of heat. Stoves were not installed in the Farmington church until 1824 and the West Avon church was built in 1818 without a chimney.

We may say as Governor Treadwell said a hundred and sixty years ago, "The present time marks a revolution of taste and manners of immense importance to society" for so a passing generation speaks to the one that is following it. It is not for me to speak understandingly of the great industrial centers near us, the motor vehicles that make it possi-

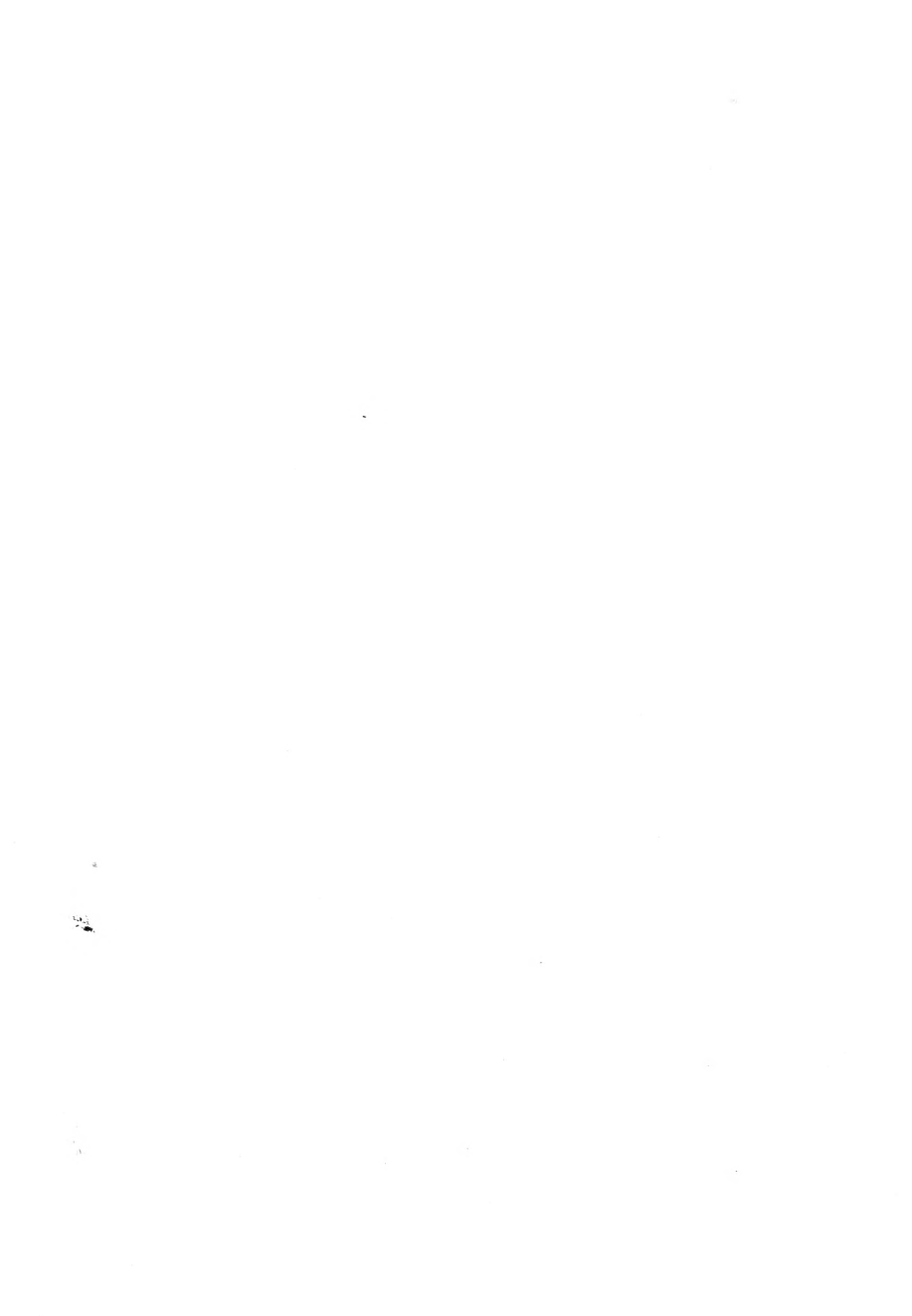
ble for those employed to live in rural communities, and the sudden appearance of housing developments.

We could quote again from Governor Treadwell 160 years ago and say "while others glory in this we cannot help dropping a tear at the close of the golden age of our ancestors, while with a pensive pleasure we reflect on the past and with suspense and apprehension anticipate the future."

But that is not in the true American spirit, rather let us take to our hearts the motto of our state which in an accepted translation asserts unfalteringly, "He who brought us hither still sustains".

Written for the Avon Woman's Club

October 12, 1954





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